THE LOST ART OF FEEDBACK

The ability and willingness to communicate effectively is the key to supervisory success. Although communication effectiveness is based on the ability to make and maintain effective contact, regardless of the situation, specific areas of communications require some additional thought and planning.

One of the most important tools for maintaining control and developing people is the proper use of feedback. Although feedback has been categorized as positive and negative, another way of viewing it is to classify it into *supportive* feedback (which reinforces an ongoing behavior) and *corrective* feedback (which indicates that a change in behavior is appropriate). In this sense, all feedback is positive. The purpose of all feedback should be to assist an individual in maintaining or enhancing his or her present level of effectiveness of appropriateness.

Some feedback, by definition, is better than no feedback. There are, however, ways to do it well and ways to do it superbly. This article presents some guidelines that can help to sharpen the process. The most important function of feedback is to help the individual who is receiving the feedback to keep in touch with what is going on in the environment.

Supportive Feedback

Supportive feedback is used to reinforce behavior that is effective and desirable. An axiom of effective supervision is "Catch them doing something right and let them know it" (Blanchard & Johnson, 1982). One of the most damaging and erroneous assumptions that many supervisors make is that good performance and appropriate behavior are to be expected from the employee and that the only time feedback is needed is when the employee does something wrong. Therefore, these supervisors never give supportive feedback. If a supervisor, however, were determined to give only one kind of feedback, he or she would be ahead to choose supportive feedback and let corrective feedback go. In other words, if a supervisor stresses errors only, the end result would be-at most-an attempt by employees to do standard, error-free work. This accomplishment would not be *bad*, but there is a better way.

If a supervisor concentrated on what the employees were doing well, then superior work is what the employees would become aware of. They would begin to view their work in terms of performing as well and as creatively as possible. What is reinforced has a tendency to become stronger. What is not reinforced has a tendency to face away. If excellence is actively reinforced and errors are simply mentioned, employees will focus on excellence and tend to diminish errors. The following example of the two types of feedback illustrates the difference.

Focus on errors: "The last three pieces in that batch contained wrong figures. We cannot have   that kind of sloppy work in this department."

Focus on good work: "This batch looks good, except for the last three pieces, which contained   wrong figures. You probably used the wrong formula. Take them back and check them out,   just the way you did the first group."

Fortunately, however, no one has to make a choice between using only supportive or only corrective feedback. Both are essential and valuable, and it is important to understand how each works so that the maximum gain can be received from the process.

Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback is used to alter a behavior that is ineffective or inappropriate. It is as essential to growth process as supportive feedback. A corrective feedback session, although never hurtful if done properly, is not a particularly pleasant experience. Under the best of circumstances, the subordinate will probably feel a little defensive or embarrassed.

In giving corrective feedback, the manager should have an option ready to present. When the employee is made aware of the inappropriate behavior, having an immediate alternative can be effective and powerful in shaping behavior. By presenting the alternative immediately after the corrective feedback, the manager is helping the subordinate to come out of a personally uncomfortable situation in the shortest possible time. This protects the dignity of the subordinate. The manager would also be establishing himself or herself as a supporter of good work and good workers, which would go a long way in developing strong, productive, and supportive working relationships. Also very important, the manager would be presenting an alternative that the employee might never have considered - or that was considered and rejected. This provides for immediate learning. Most important, however, is the fact that the manager would make the employee aware that an alternative was available at the time the employee chose to act otherwise. This awareness can facilitate the employee in taking responsibility for his or her own choices. That is, the employee would realize, "That's right, I could have done it that way." The following example shows how an alternative can be effectively added to the feedback.

"When you snapped at Ann in front of the group, she appeared to be very embarrassed and angry. *When you must remind an employee to be on time, it's less embarrassing for everyone to discuss it with the employee privately after the meeting.*"

Guidelines for Effective Feedback

The following guidelines are helpful for managers who are trying to improve their feedback skills, and they may also be used as a review prior to giving feedback.

1. Deal in Specifics

Being specific is the most important rule in giving feedback, whether it is supportive or corrective. Unless the feedback is specific, very little learning or reinforcement is possible. The following examples illustrate the difference in general and specific statements.

> *General*: "I'm glad to see that your work is improving."
> *Specific*: "I'm pleased that you met every deadline in the last three weeks."
> *General*: "You're a very supportive person."
> *Specific*: "I appreciate your taking time to explain the contract to our new employee."

> *General*: "You're falling down on the job again."
> *Specific*: "Last month most of your cost reports were completely accurate, but last week four of your profit/loss figures were wrong."

The last set is, of course, an example of corrective feedback. General statements in corrective feedback frequently result in hostile or defensive confrontations, whereas specific statements set the stage for problem-solving interaction. Carrying the last illustration one step farther, the manager could add an alternative: "Start checking the typed report against the computer printouts. Some of the errors may be typos, not miscalculations."

If the employee is to learn from feedback and respond to it, then he or she must see it in terms of *observable* effects. That is, the employee must be able to see clearly how his or her behavior had a direct impact on the group's performance, morale, etc. When the employee sees the point of the feedback objectively, the issue will be depersonalized, and the employee will be more willing to continue with appropriate behaviors or to modify inappropriate behaviors. Although the manager's personal approval ("I'm glad to see. . .") or disapproval ("I'm disappointed that. . .") can give emphasis to feedback, it must be supported by specific data in order to effect a change in behavior.

2. Focus on Actions, Not Attitudes

Just as feedback must be specific and observable in order to be effective, it must be nonthreatening in order to be acceptable. Although subordinates - like supervisors - are always accountable for their *behavior*, they are never accountable for their attitudes or feelings. Attitudes and feelings cannot be measured, nor can a manager determine if or when an employee's feelings have changed. For feedback to be acceptable, it must respect the dignity of the person receiving the feedback.

No one can attack attitudes without dealing in generalities, and frequently attacks on attitudes result in defensive reactions. The following example illustrates the difference in giving feedback on behavior and giving feedback on attitudes.

> *Feedback on attitude*: "You have been acting hostile toward Jim."
> *Feedback on behavior*: "You threw the papers down on Jim's desk and used profanity."

An attitude that managers often try to measure is loyalty. Certain actions that *seem* to indicate loyalty or disloyalty can be observed, but loyalty is a *result*, not an action. It cannot be demanded; it must be earned. Whereas people have total control over their own behavior, they often exercise little control over their feelings and attitudes. They feel what they feel. If a manager keeps this in mind and focuses more energy on things that can be influenced (i.e., employee behavior), changes are more likely to occur.

The more that corrective feedback is cast in specific behavioral terms, the more it supports problem solving and the easier it is to control. The more that corrective feedback is cast in attitudinal terms, the more it will be perceived as a personal attack and the more difficult it will be to deal with. The more that supportive feedback is cast in terms of specific behaviors, the higher the probability that those behaviors will be repeated and eventually become part of the person's natural way of doing things.

3. Determine the Appropriate Time and Place

Feedback of either type works best if it is given as soon as feasible after the behavior occurs. Waiting decreases the impact that the feedback will have on the behavior. The passage of time may make the behavior seem less important to the manager; other important events begin to drain the energy of the manager and some of the details of the behavior might be forgotten. On the other hand, dwelling on it for a long period could blow it out of proportion. From the subordinates' viewpoint, the longer the wait for the feedback, the less important it must be. The following example illustrates this point.

Tardy feedback: "Several times last month you fell below your quota."
Immediate feedback: "There are only ten products here; your quota for today was fourteen."

Enough time should be allotted to deal with the issues in their entirety. A manager can undercut the effectiveness by looking at the clock and speeding up the input so that an appointment can be met. Answering the telephone or allowing visitors to interrupt the conversation can have the same effect. The manager can also cause unnecessary stress by telling an employee at ten o'clock in the morning "I want to see you at three this afternoon." A more appropriate procedure would be to say, "Would you please come to my office now" or "When you reach a stopping point, drop by my office. I have something good to tell you."

In addition to an appropriate time, the setting for the feedback is important. The old proverb, "Praise in public, censure in private," is partially correct. Almost without exception, corrective feedback is more appropriately given in private. In the case of supportive feedback, however, discretion is needed. In many instances, praise in public is appropriate and will be appreciated by the subordinate. In other instances, privacy is needed to keep the positive effect from being short-circuited. For example, some people make a virtue out of humility; any feedback that reinforces their sense of worth is embarrassing. Rather than appreciating an audience, this type of employee would find it painful and perhaps resent it.

Sometimes a norm arises in a work group that prevents anyone from making a big deal out of good work. This does not mean that the group does not value good work, but supportive feedback in private might prevent the employee from feeling he or she was responsible for breaking the norm. In other instances, public praise can cause jealousy, hostility, or tense working relationships. Therefore, a conscious decision should be made about whether or not to give the supportive feedback publicly.

Another important consideration is the actual location selected for giving the feedback. The delivery of the feedback should match its importance. If the feedback concerns an important action, the manager's office would be better than an accidental encounter in the hall. On the other hand, the manager might convey a quick observation by telling someone at the water fountain, "Say, that was beautiful artwork on the Madison report." Choosing the time and place is a matter of mixing a little common sense with an awareness of what is going on.

4. Refrain from Inappropriately Including Other Issues

Frequently when feedback is given, other issues are salient. When supportive feedback is given, any topic that does not relate to the specific feedback point should not be discussed if it would undercut the supportive feedback. For example, the manager could destroy the good just accomplished by adding, "And by the way, as long as you are here, I want to ask you to try to keep your files a little neater. While you were away, I couldn't find a thing."

When corrective feedback is given, however, the situation is different. The manager will want the feedback to be absorbed as quickly and as easily as possible, with the employee's negative feelings lasting no longer than necessary. Therefore, as soon as the feedback has been understood and acknowledged, the manager is free to change the subject. The manager may want to add, "I'm glad that you see where the error occurred. Now, as long as you are here, I'd like to ask your opinion about...." This type of statement, when used appropriately, lets the subordinate know that he or she is still valued.
Obviously, the manager should not contrive a situation just to add this type of statement, but when the situation is naturally there, the manager is free to take advantage of it.

In certain situations, it is appropriate to give supportive and corrective feedback simultaneously. Training periods of new employees, performance-appraisal sessions, and times when experienced employees are tackling new and challenging tasks are all good examples of times when both types of feedback are appropriate. Nevertheless, some cautions are necessary:

Never follow the feedback with the word "but." It will negate everything that was said before it. If it is appropriate to give supportive and corrective feedback within the same sentence, the   clauses should be connected with "and." This method allows both parts of the sentence to be heard clearly and sets the stage for a positive suggestion. The following examples illustrate the   difference.

Connected with but: "Your first report was accurate, but your others should have measured up
                 to it."
Connected with and: "Your first report was accurate, and your others should have measured
                     up to it."
Connected with but: "You were late this morning, but Anderson called to tell you what a great
                 job you did on the Miller account."
Connected with and: "You were late this morning, and Anderson called to tell you what a
                     great job you did on the Miller account."

Alternate the supportive and corrective feedback. When a great deal of feedback must be given, it is frequently better to mix the supportive feedback with the corrective feedback than to give all of one type and then all of the other. Regardless of which types comes first, the latter will be remembered the most clearly. If a chronic self-doubter is first given supportive feedback and then only corrective feedback, he or she is likely to believe the supportive feedback was given just to soften the blow of the other type. Alternating between the two types will make all the feedback seem more genuine.

Where feasible, use the supportive feedback to cushion the corrective feedback. When both types of feedback are appropriate, there is usually no reason to start with corrective feedback.

However, this does not mean that corrective feedback should be quickly sandwiched in between supportive feedback statements. Each type is important, but frequently supportive feedback can be used as an excellent teaching device for areas that need correcting. This is especially true if the employee has done a good job previously and then failed later under similar circumstances. For example, the manager might say, "The way you helped Fred to learn the codes when he was transferred to this department would be appropriate in training the new employees."

Principles Feedback

Two major principles govern the use of feedback. The first principle, which relates to how feedback is conducted, can be paraphrased "I can't tell you how you are, and you can't tell me what I see." In other words, the person giving the feedback is responsible to relate the situation as he or she observes it, and the person receiving the feedback is responsible for relating what he or she meant, felt, or thought. The second principle is that feedback supports growth.

Giving Feedback:

"You Can't Tell Me What I See"

The object of giving feedback is not to judge the other person, but to report what was seen and heard and what the effects of the behavior were. Personal approval or disapproval, even if important, is secondary.

Feedback should be given directly to the person for whom it is intended. When others are present, the manager sometimes addresses them almost to the exclusive of the intended recipient, who sits quietly and gathers information by eavesdropping. Good contact with the recipient is an essential element in giving feedback.

It is never necessary to apologize for giving corrective feedback. Corrective or otherwise feedback is a gift; apologies will discount its importance and lessen its impact. Nevertheless, corrective feedback must be given in a way that does not jeopardize the recipient's dignity and sense of self-worth.

It is sometimes helpful to offer an interpretation of the behavior or a hunch about what the behavior might indicate. What is of paramount importance is that the interpretation be offered as a suggestion and *never* as a judgment or clinical evaluation of the person. Only the recipient is capable of putting it into a meaningful context. For example, the manager might say, "When Pete showed you the error you made; you told him it was none of his concern. I wonder if you were mad at Pete for some other reason." This statement shows the recipient the behavior and allows him or her to consider a possible cause for that behavior.

Receiving Feedback:
"You Can't Tell Me How I Am"

From the recipient's viewpoint, the first principle is "You can't tell me how I am, and I can't tell you what you see." Although most people realize that giving feedback correctly requires skill and awareness, they are less aware of the importance of knowing how to receive feedback. When receiving feedback, many people tend to argue about, disown, or attempt to justify the

information. Statements like "I didn't say that," "That's not what I meant," and "You don't understand what I was trying to do" are attempts to convince the person giving the feedback that he or she didn't see or observe what he or she claims. However, the recipient needs to understand that the observer-whether manager, peer, or subordinate-is relating what he or she experienced as a result of the recipients behavior. There is nothing wrong with the giver and receiver having different viewpoints. The purpose of feedback is to give a new view or to increase awareness. If an argument ensues and the observer backs down, the recipient is the loser.

The appropriate response, as a rule of thumb, is to say "thank you" when either type of feedback is received. It is also appropriate, of course, to ask for clarity or more detail on any issue.

The purpose of feedback is to help the recipient. Feedback can be thought of as food. It is very nourishing. When people are hungry, food is what they need; but when they are full, food is the last thing they want or need. The same applies to ingesting feedback. When people have had enough, they should call a halt. Attempting to absorb all the feedback that might be available, or that various people would like to give, is like forcing food into a full stomach just because someone says, "Please have some more."
The recipient is responsible for demanding specificity in feedback. No feedback should be accepted as legitimate if it cannot be clearly demonstrated by an observable behavior. For example, if someone says, "You're very arrogant," an appropriate response would be "What specifically have I said or done to cause you to think that?" If that response is countered with "I don't know; I just experience you that way," then the accusation should be immediately forgotten. People cannot afford to change just to meet everyone's personal like or expectations.

In fact, it is impossible to change to meet *everyone's* expectations, and the situation becomes compounded as more and more people give the feedback. A single act can generate disparate feedback
from different people who observe the behavior. For example, a loud exclamation could be viewed as appropriately angry by one person; overly harsh, by another; and merely uncouth, by a third. Each person will see it from his or her unique perspective. Therefore feedback requires action from both the giver and the receiver. Only the giver can tell what he or she observed or experienced, and only the recipient can use the information in deciding whether or not to change the behavior.

For feedback to be effective, the receiver must hear what the giver is saying, weigh it, and then determine whether or not the information is relevant. The following example illustrates how this can be done.

> *Department manager*: "Waste in your unit is up by 4 percent. Are you having any problems with your employees?"
>
> *Supervisor*: "I was not aware of the waste increase. No, I am not having trouble with my employees. I suppose I have been focusing on the quality so much that I lost sight of the waste figures. Thanks for bringing this to my attention.

Feedback Supports Growth

The second major principle, "feedback supports growth," is important, because we cannot always see ourselves as others see us. Although an individual may be the world's foremost authority on himself or herself, there are still parts of the individual that are more obvious to other people. Although people may be more aware of their own needs and capabilities and more concerned about their own welfare than other people are, they are able to stretch themselves and grow if they pay attention to feedback from others. Although feedback may be extremely uncomfortable at the time, the individual can look back later and realize the feedback was the spark that inspired the change that turned his or her career or personal life in a different direction. If the feedback is not rejected or avoided, recipients can discover and develop ways to work that they did not think were available.

Feedback Strategies

The strategies suggested here are not step-by-step procedures to be blindly followed. Their purpose is to help in planning and organizing an approach to dealing with an issue. They offer a logical and effective sequence of events for the feedback session. The person planning the session must decide on the desired future objective. (The "future," however, could be five minutes after the session or two years later.) During the feedback session, attention must be focused on what is happening in terms of the outcome. That is, the focus must be on obtaining the goal, not on sticking to the strategy. This focus allows the giver to change tactics or even modify the original strategy if conditions change or unforeseen events occur. After the strategy is selected, the following three rules should be kept in mind:

1. Be clear about what you want in terms of specific, identifiable outcomes for yourself, your subordinate, and the organization.
2. Plan what you intend to say and how you intend to conduct the meeting, according to the particular strategy you will use.
3. Have the strategy in mind as you engage the individual, but keep it in the background.

Supportive Feedback Strategy

The following steps are suggested as a strategy for supportive feedback:

1. *Acknowledge the specific action and result to be reinforced*. Immediately let the subordinate know that you are pleased about something he or she did. Be specific and describe the event in behavioral terms. "You finished the project (*action*) on time (*result*)."

2. *Explain the effects of the accomplishment and state your appreciation*. For the behavior to be reinforced, the person must be able to see the effects of that behavior in specific, observable ways. Your appreciation is important but as an additional reinforcing element. The main reinforcement is the effect. "It was a major factor in getting the contract (*effect*), and I am pleased with your outstanding work (*appreciation*)."

3. *Help the subordinate to take full responsibility for the success*. If the employee acknowledges the feedback, this step is accomplished. If the employee seems overly modest, more work is needed. Unless he or she can, to some degree, internalize the success and receive satisfaction from it, very little growth will occur. One approach would be to ask how the success was accomplished or if any problems were encountered and how they were overcome. In talking about what happened, the employee is likely to realize how much he or she was really responsible for. It is important for both you and the employee to hear how the success was accomplished.

4. *Ask if the subordinate wants to talk about anything else*. While the employee is feeling positive and knows that you are appreciative and receptive, he or she may be willing to open up about other issues. The positive energy created by this meeting can be directed toward other work-related issues, so take advantage of the opportunity.

5. *Thank the subordinate for the good performance*. The final step, again thanking the subordinate for the accomplishment, assures that your appreciation will be uppermost in his or her mind as he or she leaves and returns to the work setting.

Corrective Feedback Strategy

The following steps are suggested as a strategy for corrective feedback:

1. *Immediately describe the event in behavioral terms and explain the effect*. Relate clearly in specific, observable, and behavioral terms the nature of the failure or behavior and the effect of the failure or behavior or the work group or organization. If you can appropriately say something to reduce the employee's embarrassment, the employee is more likely to accept the feedback nondefensively.

2. *Ask what happened*. Before assuming that the subordinate is at fault, ask what happened. In many instances, the subordinate is not at fault or is only partially responsible. At the worst, the employee is given an opportunity to explain before you proceed; at the best, you may receive information that would prevent you from censuring the employee.

3. *Help the subordinate to take full responsibility for the actions*. The more time spent in step 2 (finding out what happened), the easier step 3 will be. The subordinate needs to learn from the experience in order to reduce the probability of a reoccurrence. Unless this step is handled effectively, the subordinate will see himself or herself as a victim, rather than as someone who made a mistake and is willing to correct it.

4. *Develop a plan to deal with the issues*. Once the subordinate has accepted responsibility, the next step is to help rectify the situation. Now that the employee is willing to be accountable for errors, you can jointly devise a plan that will help eliminate them. That is, both of you must agree to take action. If you both want the same thing (i.e., better performance from the subordinate), then both of you are obligated to do something about it. This is also an excellent opportunity to build on the subordinate's strengths (e.g., "I'd like for you to show the same fine attention to safety regulations that you show to job specifications").

5. *State your confidence in the subordinate's ability*. Once the issue is resolved, end the session by stating your confidence in the ability of the employee to handle the situation. The object is to allow the subordinate to re-enter the work setting feeling as optimistic about himself as the situation permits. The subordinate must also understand that you will follow up and give additional feedback when the situation warrants it.